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Underneath Hypercapitalism

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As Joel Spring's description of Singapore's Orchard Road suggests, Benetton, Zara, Nike, BMW, LG, Microsoft dominate the visual and textual landscape, where signage, advertising, packaging, labeling and the environments of the connected underground malls and walkways merge into a wall-to-wall, 24/7 print and visual mediation (C. Luke, 2006). But behind the storefronts and underneath the multi-story videoscreens of Orchard Road in Singapore, Nathan Road in Kowloon; within the central shopping malls and markets of Tokyo, Bangkok and Shanghai; on and around the public transport and vertical public housing of these cities - we hear and see complex, local linguistic and cultural ecologies.

On its surface, *this* textual world is a montage of images of fashion and beauty, material wealth and cultural identity, sexuality and, on occasion, even spirituality – touting the promises of modernity and hypermodernity, technology and consumption in achieving these. As Spring argues, the dominant mythologies and ideologies of the new world order are at work here. These urban spaces, their material objects and images, and their institutional pathways offer narrative versions of the 'good life' of corporate, multinational capitalism in the new cosmopolis (Luke & Ismail, 2007). And they are mostly silent – despite the rise of 'Green' eco-branding and 'Red' poverty marketing – about the biosocial, military, human and material consequences of these same forms of life.

Locals and guidebooks point tourists to the few remaining historical sites, traditional architecture, tea houses, wet markets and streetscapes – sandwiched between high rises. These traces of cultural and linguistic authenticity past are branded as 'heritage' sites. As semiotically engineered spaces, the boulevards and malls are the new local *scapes* of global consumer culture where people work, shop, play, hang out, grow up, and, indeed, teach and learn about these new forms of life, ideologies and linguistic blends. But locals inevitably know the uses and limits of these corporate cultural spaces. They know well not just where to shop and not to shop, but as well their city's undergrounds and sidestreets, historical troubles and hauntings.

Where we listen and watch closely - we hear and see more subtle, quotidian codes, signs and symbols of contact, negotiation and trade-off between this new transnational order and vernacular cultures. At times this contact is grinding and at times mellifluous, at times linguistically surprising and at others mundane. People mix and match languages and dialects. They turn languages and terms upside down and inside out, using them for parody, irony, humour and fun. They code switch to mark out territory, affiliation, solidarity and membership. In the face of centralized state and corporate surveillance – individuals and communities use language and discourse to stretch and bend the official and unofficial 'out of bounds' markers over what can be said about and to power, whether corporate or state.

The linguistic and cultural blendings in these cities are prime examples of the local contingency of discourse. Transnational brandings become lexical borrowings, with LG, Google and Sony (Asian *and* EuroAmerican) working acronyms and euphemisms, nouns and verbs in spoken Cantonese, Korean, Tamil and Malay. English-medium service is available, provided by, multilingual and multidialectal local entrepreneurs and shopkeepers, taxi drivers, food and sex workers, cleaners and touters. Their work requires very specific mastery of the technical registers of 'service-English', in typically diglossic forms.

During business hours in the marketplace, they and we – the cultural and intellectual tourists, global traders and consumers, guest workers and expatriates of East Asia – operate at the street level of the new linguistic order and cultural economy that Joel Spring describes. But in the office towers of Hong Kong Island, Singapore, Seoul and Yokohama central – above the streetscapes – are other strata of cosmopolitan workers, working in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Japanese, sometimes all at once. There we would hear the master discourses of the economic and cultural orders of hypercapitalism. Specialist workers in the semiotic economy write and speak in the technocratic registers of the corporate and financial field (e.g. marketing, economics, quality assurance, process engineering). They are across the legal-juridical discourses of the specialized regulatory grids and categories of the state and corporation. These sit as enabling and procedural discourses for conversion of the new digital, biomedical, mechanical and human sciences into 'truth' and 'value' for corporate expansion and capitalization (Graham & Luke, 2005).

These 'high rise' discourses are bids to monitor, regulate and generate the flows of capital, bodies, goods, services and information on the streets, in the hinterlands, and across boarders. They are master discourses insofar as they purport or are taken to be universally valid across the local sites, cultures and languages – bids to explain and regulate the skills, functions, habits and dispositions for the new economies at the most micro levels of work, consumption and experience. The spread of neoliberal, corporate discourses into government, non-government organisations, and small businesses are a case in point. And however intuitive they have become for educated classes, they are discourses that stand beyond the formal comprehension, much less criticism, of many speakers (Luke, Luke & Graham, 2007). That is, they operate within corporate, state and non-government institutions as part of a fabric of common sense assumptions about the ethical and moral, human and material consequences of these same institutions. But as artifacts of language and discourse, they are not fait acompli - and always subject to the idiosyncratic agency of the streets.

Singaporean service workers shift readily from English to Singlish, from English to Mandarin, from English to Malay depending on audience and purpose, as they move from the mall to the mosque, from office to extended family life in their local public housing flat. In Hong Kong, we encounter a Cantonese so stubbornly entrenched in everyday life that it refuses to disappear, despite a century of English colonisation and the movement of world language Mandarin across the borders and boundaries of the new China. Language corpus and status planning is underway, but the shift ultimately will be towards economically and politically ascendant Mandarin, not to English.

In Japan, we encounter unique blends of youth, corporate and technological cultures that work predominantly in Japanese – with few official or legal supports for English or any second language. This same mass culture has reshaped the way Midwestern American adolescents and children dance, how they play, what they read, how they express themselves, and how they dress. Few domains of American popular youth and mass culture – the heart of the consumer economy Spring describes - have not been influenced by the powerful, hybrid genres of Hong Kong cinema, or by the symbols, texts and images of Japanese youth culture, from Hello Kitty and Pokemon, to comic book narrative formats, videogame scenarios and animated genres for adults.

So the picture is not one of uni-dimensional corporate capital and power flowing from an Western economic Anglosphere towards East Asia. These relations are in transition – driven not by linguistic or technical superiority of Mandarin, any more than they would have been by the linguistic characteristics of English. Rather they are being reshaped by the emergent international redistribution of power and capital, labor and consumption led by China and India. New alliances and negotiations – for example, between Newscorp or Google and the Chinese state – will be crucial in shaping the new economic and information orders.

An historical materialist view of language and language change, then, would underline the role of economic and political domination in the shaping of whose languages will count, for whom, and where. It would focus on affiliated patterns of the social distribution of dialect and accent, and the consequences of linguisticide in indigenous and minority communities. But as importantly, it would examine the transnational and interlingual spread of these 'master discourses' of economic, political and social power – their presuppositions, local variations, and consequences.

I concur with Joel Spring's broad educational project. A democratic education in these economic conditions requires a strong reorientation towards environmental and civic ethics, a renewed humanism that enables and values diverse forms of cultural, spiritual and economic life, and, of course, a new responsibility to the biosphere, as Native North American, Inuit, Maori, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have always demanded. But it must as well be based on an understanding of the stratification of the orders of discourse of the new capitalism. The purpose of a critical language education would be to make these master discourses accessible, namable, criticisable, and open to moral and ethical challenge.

Linguistic ecology sits in contingent, dynamic relations to the political economy of language and discourse. In the economies and state formations of East Asia, mastery of different varieties of English does indeed count in terms of access to employment, mobility, capital and power. This applies not just to cosmpolitan elites working in transnational finance and technology, but as well to many itinerant guest workers who cross borders to service the new economies.

At the same time, all the local economies of these countries are built around stratified and differentiated access to the technocratic discourses that make up and run the transnational corporate economic order. The corporate world order, like the old industrial one, is based on discourse hierarchies: technocratic registers form new operational norms and codes, and transliterated forms of life that align technical rationalist classes and across borders and languages. English is a current convenience

for this political economy. The challenge for language and education is not simply one of balancing access to dominant world languages with the right to vernacular, indigenous and regional languages – it is equally one of wider access to and the critical transformation of those master discourses of hypercapitalism.

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